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STATE FOR IO/SHA, DRL/MLA  
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SUBJECT: LETTER FROM REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SYG ON THE HUMAN  
RIGHTS OF IDPS REGARDING HURRICANE KATRINA

1. Mission received the following communication from Walter Kalin, Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, regarding the situation in the United States in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. This communication has been forwarded to IO/SHA via e-mail and is number 29 on the Geneva 2005 Communications Log.

2. Begin text of letter:

REFERENCE: G/SO 214 (26-14)/PO

2 September 2005

Excellency,

Allow me, both personally and in my capacity as Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, to extend my sincere condolences to your Government for the deaths and physical destruction suffered in New Orleans and surrounding areas of Louisiana and Mississippi in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

I take this opportunity further to the mandate entrusted to me by the Commission on Human Rights in Resolution 2004/55 to engage in advocacy for improving protection and respect of the human rights of the internally displaced and to continue and enhance dialogues with Governments, to express my concern over the current situation in a number of respects. The displacement of up to half a million persons and the deaths of thousands would pose vast challenges for any Government to address; a number of the current circumstances could not readily have been foreseen and planned for in advance and emergency responses take time to be fully geared up.

Bearing these factors in mind, I wish to communicate to you through this channel my concern in four main areas. Firstly, particularly in New Orleans, consistent media reports have indicated an exacerbated situation of physical insecurity for many thousands of people. Numerous cases of physical attacks, including rapes, and threats thereof are understood to have occurred in a situation of lawlessness and hostility exceeding the powers of law enforcement authorities currently to control. Persons in states of heightened vulnerability due to deprivation of food, water and, in some cases, essential medicine are at heightened risk in these circumstances. I therefore am sure you will agree that as a matter of utmost priority the deployment of sufficient law enforcement personnel is needed to assure the physical safety of those currently in New Orleans.

Secondly, the slow pace with which essentials of food, water and basic medicines have reached hurricane-affected populations, notably in New Orleans, is a matter of concern. In particular, in situations of mass accommodation such as the Superdome stadium where the overall numbers of persons and corresponding needs can be readily ascertained, the provision of such supplies takes on a critical dimension.

Thirdly, I encourage your Government in framing its response to the current disaster to take particular account of vulnerable groups. In the present situation, those have been shown to be, in particular, the poor, the elderly and those without medical or property insurance. I trust that the policies formulated will have as a particular priority a focus on the human rights and individual needs of persons in these categories and their corresponding vulnerabilities.

Finally, given the large scale displacement of people to other parts of the States affected and further afield within the country, it is important that your Government once beyond the initial phase of emergency relief develop a comprehensive plan for the support and return of these persons to their places of habitual residence as soon as possible. It is of particular importance that such people, far from their homes, be kept informed about the efforts planned and undertaken, and be included in the formulation of policies affecting both them and their areas of former residence.

In my visits to numerous countries as Representative of the Secretary-General, I have found the Guiding Principles on

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Internal Displacement to be a useful tool for Governments at all levels, federal, State and local, in identifying the needs of displaced persons and in formulating policies attuned to the human rights of these people. By way of offering practical guidance to policymakers and those executing emergency responses, the Principles have shown their value in situations of natural disaster as well as armed conflict. I would therefore also commend them to your Government in developing the response to the current situation.

I stand ready to engage further with your Government on these pressing issues and offer my every support to the efforts at all levels that are being taken to safeguard the human rights of those affected by the current catastrophe.

Yours sincerely,

Walter Kalin  
Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights  
of Internally Displaced Persons

End text of letter.

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